



The impact of social media marketing on tourism in Lebanon

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Abstract

This study assesses and investigates the current marketing trends of Lebanese tourism by shedding the light on the online and offline marketing strategies adopted by Lebanese touristic companies. For this study, 10 Lebanese touristic companies were selected; five of which used online marketing, and five of which used offline marketing. Contrasts the selected Lebanese touristic companies that implement social media marketing, how effective is their implementation and what problems do they face while applying SMM for a marketing campaign with those that don't, to seek the approaches monitored by both to strive in the current Lebanese economic misfortunes. The study is conducted using a qualitative questionnaire to interview five Lebanese touristic companies that use SMM and five that use offline mkt. The most notable findings are that the company owner agreement on the proper SMM implementation can boost the company exposure and ROI (return on investment).

Keywords: Lebanon, tourism, marketing, social media marketing (SMM)

1. Introduction

All realms are enthralling by their own unique climates, features, cultures and foods, which captivates people from around the globe and drives them to be actively travelling from a nation to another. This fleeting action of travelling domestically or intercontinentally for leisure is known as "Tourism" thereby exploring a country in any of the previously indicated facets ^[1]. Conferring to McIntosh & Goeldner, tourism is "the sum of the phenomena and relationships arising from the interaction of tourists, business suppliers, host governments and host communities in the process of attracting and hosting these tourists and other visitors." ^[2] It is sensible to distinguish between regular travelling and tourism; for instance, the former is done for eviction, immigration, war, religious conviction and trade while the motives for the latter are education, relaxation, leisure, free time, sociability and entertainment ^[3].

1.1 Tourism through history

During the bygone eras and rendering to evidences, amusement and relaxation tourism existed in the pharaohs' eon in Egypt; the fortunate groups left writings about their travels to Gizeh and Sphinx, as did the Greeks who toured to contribute in the early Olympic Games. With the expansion of the infrastructure, classical Rome encouraged the holiday tours in 300 A.D. by developing the "bathing holidays" and "summer health retreat", which are sophisticated thermal bathes aside to luxurious entertainment locations. The mediaeval tourism principally focused on the movement of errant scholars to famous European academic establishments, tailed by the movement of journeymen during the 16th and 18th century to diverse countries en route for practicing crafts and homecoming to their country as accomplished blokes ^[4-5]. All the way through the 19th century which was recognized as

the evolving phase of tourism owing to the Central European System of transport that enriched the mobility and created innovative touristic inclinations, tourism was mostly curbed to affluent, honorable societies and educated experts. ^[6] This epoch and the subsequent one are maintained as the modern tourism precursors. They were centered on the aristocracies wandering to designated high point cities such as London, Paris, Rome, Madrid and Munich to learn the proper etiquette and elegance. Later on, medical tourism became the prevailing incentive for travelling in the 20th century ^[5, 7]. The aforementioned touristic influences throughout the centuries with the great technological triumphs and facilitations, stemmed with Globalization and the expansion of contemporary tourism ^[8].

1.2 A glimpse on the Lebanese tourism

Lebanon unquestionably accompanied the touristic progress throughout the centuries. The etymology of the word "Lebanon" and its archaeological sites indicate that this bijou was a shelter for many historical hordes. The name "Lebanon", which means "white", originates from Phoenician roots to resemble Lebanon's snow-capped summits ^[9]. This 10452 km² area of magnificence and pride residing on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea contains around four million residents, and hosts the six well-known cities: Beirut—the capital—Byblos, Sidon, Tyre, Tripoli and Baalbek. The ecological biodiversity of Lebanon is one of the most attractive in the Middle East and the Arab region due to the outstanding climate and the immense range of geomorphological districts and microclimates ranging from mountains, to fields, and beaches, prompt the improvement of local and foreign tourism.

The Lebanese Republic was created in September 1920 when the French mandate prolonged the borders of the previous

autonomous Ottoman Mount Lebanon region, and it consequently became an independent country in 1943 [10-11].

The evolution of this ancient land throughout the millenniums is a result of the several civilizations that occupied it, including: Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders, Mamlukes and Ottomans. [12] The journey began prehistorically with the Neolithic and Chalcolithic fishing groups who subsisted on the coastline of the Mediterranean Sea leaving their remnants in Byblos. Shortly after, the Phoenicians settled in Lebanon leaving behind prominent monuments in Byblos, Tyre, Sidon, and Baalbek—it was later on conquered by the Greek Empire. Evidently, Romans ruled Lebanon for over than 300 years, and the ancient Phoenician site was sustainably nurtured and flourished as cores of trade and commerce. The Roman Theatre in Jbeil, the Great Roman bath in Central Beirut district and the largest Roman temple ever constructed in Baalbek are all one of the most visited touristic destinations in Lebanon. Looking back through history, Lebanon was conquered by the Arabs who made it a state for Omayyad califs then by France, the crusaders, and then the Ottomans, which were locally rejected and replaced by the Europeans [13].

The numerous cultural merging that existed in Lebanon throughout the spans enriched it with distinctive ethnic attributes that entice tourists from around the globe. The Lebanese climate and culture are part of what makes the country enchanting, in addition to the Lebanese gastronomy that is listed as one of the topmost healthy and succulent cuisines entailing an escalation in the Lebanese culture exposure and tourism [14]. Therefore, the Lebanese economy predominantly and directly depends on the tourism sector. Lebanese tourism reached its peak in 2004 after 2 years of civil war recording 25% escalation in tourism visits (1.28 million visitor). In 2005, the bombarding incidence of H.E. the prime minister Rafic Hariri and the gruesome incidences that followed interrupted the country's peace and governmental security which rendered this sector distressed leading to an economic crisis. Since then, the Lebanese tourism segment suffers its vilest ages [15]. The tourism in Lebanon kept struggling 2010 when things started to get quite better scoring 39% tourists' growth. Visitors were mainly Africans (41.5%), Europeans (21.2%) and Arabs (13.8%). Unfortunately, this almighty progress did not last long since the Syrian war calamity initiated in March 2011 instigating an elevation in the Lebanese distress level. Statistics affirm that Lebanon currently holds over 1, 3 million Syrian refugees most of which reside in the capital, Beirut. Lebanon lives a significant economic burden as a result of the consecutive crises, which does not get any better with the increasing percentage of unemployment and the neglect of the tourism sector by the government [16-17].

1.3 Tourism and social media marketing

The collapse in the Lebanese touristic zone can be revived with the proper marketing methods along with the governmental support and the implementation of the right strategies. The ADA sustains that Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large. Lebanese

marketers and tycoons should take each of the mentioned aspects into consideration to invigorate this major economic section [18]. At this time, it's an immense challenge to provide the customer with value in the Lebanese touristic sector due to the high taxes, unbelievable prices, governmental issues and strong competition among the nearby countries. The stated influences are reasons why the Lebanese people prefer to devote their reserves outside the country rather than inside it. As the touristic recession problem elevated, entrepreneurs in this sector focused on integrating their marketing strategies with social media; it is undoubted that social media has the most powerful marketing influence on people as for the majority spends an average of an hour or two on a daily basis surfing the internet. This is what is now called viral marketing.

'Social media marketing (SMM) is a form of Internet marketing that utilizes social networking websites as a marketing tool. The goal of SMM is to produce content that users share with their social network to help a company increase brand exposure and broaden customer reach.[19] in Lebanon, not many studies have been dedicated towards this sector, but it is affirmed by the Australian government statistics that SMM which is implicated as a primary marketing source for tourism promotions; thus, further encouragement was provided by the government to flourish this sector more than ever.[20] To improve the strategy of SMM in the Australian government an innovation called "Tourism e-kits" was developed by the Australian National Online Strategy Committee. The aim of the kit is to place a lot of determination in endorsing social media for tourism marketing as it helps familiarize Australian businesses to social media, puts forward steps to get involved, and gives step-by-step recommendations on using major social media sites like Facebook and Twitter [21].

1.4 Problem statement

The disconsolate situation of the Lebanese touristic sector leads many local entrepreneurs to invest their capitals in travel and tourism companies that are concerned with international tourism providing the Lebanese citizen with tempting packages ranging from BB hotel reservation, activities, tour guide along with airplane tickets and visas at unbelievably competitive prices. The competitive charges are leading the Lebanese to devote their money for international tourism rather than spending it locally in a restaurant that might charge them nearly the same amount charged for the formerly mentioned packages. Thus, companies thrive to gain competitive advantage, and social media marketing in the touristic sector is now booming in Lebanon as a primary marketing strategy. Nowadays, corporations must incorporate proper usage of SMM to gain fast fame in the business industry. Yet, some companies refuse to adopt SMM; they still advocate the conventional approach relying fundamentally on WOM (word of mouth). Nonetheless, businesses centering on SMM are gaining further respectable WOM since they are very-well exposed. The main questions are to find how effective SMM is for the touristic companies that implement it, what problems companies face during SMM campaigns, and how the companies not using SMM are venturing and still facing tough competition. Very few studies was conducted in

this area, which elicited the researchers to take this chance and start a journey in discovering the impact of SMM on the Lebanese tourism; further studies must be done to get better clarification in this field.

2. Materials and Methods

Exploratory research is attempted in this study, as it seeks to understand certain behavior or phenomenon adopted by the Lebanese touristic companies and consumers in regards to the social media usage as a marketing tool. The research design is comparative; it compares and contrasts five Lebanese touristic companies that use SMM with another five that use offline MKT. Primary and secondary data collection methods are used. Primary data are collected initially by covert observations for the Lebanese touristic companies’ online and offline behaviors. Then, researchers conducted interviews with the ten respondents to complement the data of the primary source. The primary data collected by observation and interviews provide the study with suppleness to follow up interrogations and discuss disputes concerning the issue of study. The approaches used are literature review and formal qualitative approaches through depth interviews and focus groups. The data collection instrument used is structured interviewing to collect qualitative data. The questions for the interview questions are coded, followed with some open-

ended queries to trigger unknown perspectives. The sampling target population are ten company founders and managers that adopt SMM and other five that don’t; hence, it’s a non-probability sampling as the experts in the tourism field were selected. Furthermore, a secondary data collection method was used, data was collected from multiple journal articles and publications, books, and sites. The time frame of the study is cross-sectional. It is established to examine the Lebanese touristic companies’ perspective of marketing and the motive behind each company’s implementation of a certain marketing method be it offline, online or both. It also compares the approximate ROI generated by both methods. The study procedure is finalized after the interviewees fill-up the self-administered interviewing questionnaire, which took around 30 minutes to fill-up while interviewing. It contains more than 3 tabulated question forms in regards to the marketing method pros and cons, the consumer behavior towards tourism in Lebanon and a lot more aspects.

3. Results

3.1 Research question one

What are the factors that are preventing most Lebanese tourist-related businesses from adopting social media marketing as their marketing strategy?

Table 1

Category three codes	# of participants mentioned by	# of times mentioned in all interviews
no perceived benefits from social media marketing	9/10 participants	29
lack of organizational and/or ownership support	8/10 participants	18
economic instability	7/10 participants	9
lack of flexibility/resistance to strategic change	5/10 participants	9
ineffective implementation	3/10 participants	3
lack of knowledge about social media marketing	3/10 participants	5
weak government	3/10	4
non technology-oriented target market	2/10 participants	5
risk-averse culture	2/10 participants	
perception that social media is inappropriate for business image	2/10 participants	6
underestimation of the importance of social media marketing	1/10 participants	3
lack of time	1/10 participants	2
steep learning curve for social media marketing	1/10 participants	1
no necessary infrastructure	1/10 participants	1

Code results under category three

What are the factors that are preventing most Lebanese tourist-related businesses from adopting social media marketing as their marketing strategy?

The researches have depicted the following factors:

1. Absence of perceived benefits
2. lack of support of the owner and/or organization
3. lack of flexibility (or organizational resistance to strategic change)

These can be considered the most salient factors related to the first research question that manifested themselves in the results of the research.

There are several factors that are preventing most Lebanese tourist-related businesses from adopting social media marketing as their marketing strategy. In order of descending importance, these included the absence of perceived benefits from social media marketing, lack of support of owners or organizational decision-makers, and a lack of flexibility within the organization towards change.

3.2 Research question two

What are the factors that facilitate the effective implementation of a social media marketing campaign by Lebanese tourist-related businesses?

Table 2

Low frequency category three codes	# of participants mentioned by	# of times mentioned in all interviews
ineffective implementation	3/10 participants	3
lack of knowledge about social media marketing	3/10 participants	5
weak government	3/10	4
non technology-oriented target market	2/10 participants	5
risk-averse culture	2/10 participants	
perception that social media is inappropriate for business image	2/10 participants	6
underestimation of the importance of social media marketing	1/10 participants	3
lack of time	1/10 participants	2
steep learning curve for social media marketing	1/10 participants	1
no necessary infrastructure	1/10 participants	1

Low frequency category three codes

The acceptance and approval of an SMM campaign by owners and decision-makers, the fact that owners or decision-makers must see the potential benefits of an SMM campaign and the consistency of presence and message across social media platforms are all vital factors in the effective implementation

of a social media marketing campaign.

3.3 Research question three

What are the main problems that businesses face when operating a social media marketing campaign?

Table 3

Category four codes	# of participants mentioned by	# of times mentioned in all interviews
negative customer feedback	7/10 participants	14
power struggles between social media marketing personnel and general marketing department	6/10 participants	11
lack of clear strategy	5/10 participants	9
fake reviews & feedback	4/10 participants	6
little knowledge of social media marketing	2/10 participants	3
interfering upper-level management	1/10 participants	2
risk-averse culture	1/10 participants	2
lack of ownership support	1/10 participants	1
unclear task delegation	1/10 participants	1
lack of quick benefits	1/10 participants	1
under utilization	1/10 participants	1

Code results under category four

Negative customer feedback, intra-organizational power struggles (particularly from within the marketing department itself) and the lack of a clear strategy are all very important problems faced by Lebanese TR businesses when implementing an SMM campaign.

4. Discussion

To summarize the key points, the interview transcripts were analyzed, read, and re-read for appropriate coding and categories. 48 codes were identified and organized under four general categories. Three categories were each related to one of the three research questions. There was an extra category that dealt with the benefits of SMM to allow analysis of TAM (technology acceptance model) and its relation to the results of this study.

The results of research question one showed several factors with three of them salient from the data. One factor is the lack of perceived benefits of SMM among many Lebanese TR businesses. This factor is directly related to, and supports, the first TAM factor of accepting or rejecting a certain technology: perceived benefits. Without perceived benefits of a certain technology, the potential user— in this case the Lebanese TR business— will reject using this technology. Another is the lack of support from the owners/decision-

makers to implement an SMM campaign. The final factor is the lack of flexibility and/or increased resistance to change within many Lebanese TR businesses when a new innovation is proposed (in this case social media marketing).

There are several implications as a result of these findings. It is very clear that a problem arises when the main factor preventing SMM use among Lebanese TR businesses is a lack of perceived benefits, especially when these benefits are established by so many in the field. In addition, the lack of support of Lebanese TR business owners/decision-makers for SMM further proves the lack of knowledge that exists among these managers and owners of TR businesses. Furthermore, the lack of organizational inclination of Lebanese TR businesses towards SMM indicates some stale thinking and an unhealthy risk-averseness. Consequently, one of the purposes of this study was finding out the root causes of the relatively low investment and use of SMM by Lebanese TR businesses. These three factors are very important and help business policy analysts describe the general behavior of Lebanese TR businesses towards SMM. However, since the study is limited to ten participants, perhaps it would be wise to do some further research to confirm the importance of these three factors.

5. Tables and Figures

Table 4: The different codes across the four categories consisted of the following:

Category one: The benefits of social media marketing	Category two: Factors related to the effective implementation of a social media marketing campaign	Category three: Factors preventing the increased use of social media marketing campaigns by Lebanese tourist-related businesses	Category four: The main problems faced by those businesses implementing social media marketing campaigns
1. Increased exposure	6. Decision-makers in the organization must see the benefits of social media marketing	25. No perceived benefit	38. Negative customer feedback
2. Cheap means of marketing	7. There must be owner and upper-level management acceptance of social media marketing as a marketing tool	26. Lack of flexibility/resistance to strategic change	39. Power struggles between social media marketing personnel and general marketing department
3. Increased business	8. Consistency with message across all social media platforms	27. lack of organizational and/or ownership support	40. Unclear task delegation
4. Gaining comprehensive knowledge about the customer	9. Consistent presence on the social media platforms	28. Ineffective implementation	41. Fake reviews & feedback
5. Increased traffic to main website	10. Comprehensive attention to detail	29. Steep learning curve	42. Lack of ownership support
-----	11. One social media marketing responsible person	30. Underestimating importance	43. Lack of quick benefits
-----	12. Engaging content	31. Risk-averse culture	44. lack of clear strategy
-----	13. Variety in social media platforms	32. Lack of knowledge about social media marketing	45. Interfering upper-level management
-----	14. Technology-minded and oriented staff	33. Non-technology-oriented target market older target audience	46. risk-averse culture
-----	15. Long-term detailed planning	34. Economic instability	47. Little knowledge of social media marketing
-----	16. Aligning social media marketing strategy & goals with overall business strategy and goals	35. Weak economy	48. Under utilize
-----	17. Social media should guide traffic to the company's main website	36. Lack of time or staff resources	-----
-----	18. Social media analytics use	37. Perception that social media is inappropriate for business image	-----
-----	19. Consistently monitoring customer feedback	-----	-----
-----	20. patience	-----	-----
-----	21. Effective integration of social media marketing with the rest of the marketing department	-----	-----
-----	22. Constant updating and learning about social media marketing	-----	-----
-----	23. Acceptance of social media marketing by the entire marketing staff	-----	-----
-----	24. Should use social media marketing to learn as much as possible about target market	-----	-----

6. Conclusions

This study resulted in realizing that companies adopting SMM efficiently are relatively insignificant in Lebanon yet they are relishing a prosperous business journey; however, those who are using SMM ineffectively are merely thriving. Nonetheless, applying SMM as a marketing strategy entails greater results than offline marketing. In order to use SMM and implement it effectively several insinuations and recommendations must be taken into consideration by Lebanese TR businesses. Mainly,

the welfares of social media must be effectually exposed to Lebanese TR businesses through business conferences, workshops, elucidations, and marketing campaigns. In addition, customized SMM workshops should be held in the companies to enhance the knowledge of operational staff of this area. Moreover, Lebanese TR businesses should develop a strategy with clear schedules and timelines allowing steady activity on a variety of social media platforms; this process can be effortlessly completed by hiring an SMM specialist to

facilitate the work and shrink the avoidable expenses and problems. The unremitting monitoring of Lebanese TR businesses when applying SMM campaign lessens the impact of negative customer comments and feedback. Finally, it is yearned that the recommendations of this study be taken into consideration by Lebanese TR businesses and that the study would trigger further researches in the future.

7. Recommendations

The need for holding continuous workshops, business seminars and conferences regarding the benefits of proper SMM implementation methods is persistent for Lebanese TR companies. Due to tough competition, the acceptance and application of SMM by the company owner after revising the multitude welfares is mandatory; the support and education top organization owners provide to their employees concerning this matter contribute to the enhancement of the services' sales. Moreover, implementing SMM at the government level is of equal importance; it increases the exposure of the Lebanese touristic sector internationally and enhances it.

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